

Marine in Iraq gets to welcome his newborn son through video conference

August 12, 2008 - 7:34PM

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Sun Journal

It was just after 9 p.m. Tuesday in Iraq, and Gunnery Sgt. Daniel Lawrence wasn't exactly sure when he had last slept.

"Sometime the day before," he said.

But he couldn't rest yet. He had a son to meet.

He focused on the screen in front of him, waiting for a glimpse of his wife, Donna, and the tiny boy she cradled in her arms.



Donna Lawrence shows baby Damien to his father.
Liz Bowles/Sun Journal

Damien Isaac Lawrence was born Saturday night at Craven Regional Medical Center, some 8,000 miles away from where his father is stationed. The elder Lawrence had seen a couple of pictures of his son, but on Tuesday, he was able to watch as the little boy flailed his arms about and discovered that he had a tongue.

In New Bern, his wife held their son and sat in front of a hospital laptop.

"He looks just like his daddy," Donna Lawrence said as she smoothed the small blue cap on the baby's head.

"I'm really excited that Daniel will get to see him," she said. "He's been gone since March and he has talked to me every hour that he could. But for him to be able to see us, to see that we're all right and healthy, is really nice."

The Lawrences are stationed stateside at Marine Corps Air Station Cherry Point in Havelock, where they expect to be for at least another year.

Tuesday's family video conference was set up by the Freedom Calls Foundation, a nonprofit organization that facilitates communication for military families and their loved ones. The organization has built a satellite

network that serves multiple military camps overseas and is funded entirely by donations. So far, Craven Regional Medical Center has participated in about a dozen calls like the one Tuesday.

When the technological bugs between New Bern and Iraq were somewhat ironed out, the gunnery sergeant leaned as close as he could to his screen to see his son.

"Hey, little man," he said. "Welcome to the world."

Damien is the couple's firstborn. He's an early birthday present for his mother, who will turn 29 in just a few days.

Her blood pressure was a little too high, so the baby was delivered by Cesarean section about three weeks sooner than anticipated.

He weighs 5 pounds 6 ounces and is 19 inches long.

"He's early to them, but we've been trying to have a baby for a long time - for three years," Donna Lawrence said. "I have been on fertility treatments at Camp Lejeune and they were about to wheel me in to see why nothing was working when somebody came running and said, 'Stop. Wait a minute. You don't have to do anything. You're pregnant.' "

Mother and baby are doing well and may be released from the hospital by Wednesday.

They will return to Havelock to live with the family's three dogs. Donna Lawrence is originally from Ohio and her husband's family is in Virginia.

"I was on my own during a lot of the pregnancy, so to be able to have my husband as a part of this has been wonderful," she said. "There were a few times that the picture wasn't great, but there was a time that Daniel was able to see Damien nice and clear - and he had a big smile on his face."